



## Land Use & Community Character

Horizon Plan

The pattern of land use and its density, arrangement and scale each contribute to the overall visual character of a community. Therefore, individual land use decisions that are made over the course of time, whether through zone changes for proposed new development, reuse or redevelopment of vacant and underutilized properties, or major public facility and infrastructure improvements, have a role in determining the future form and character of the community. The importance of character in creating the image of the community, which contributes to its economic development potential and desirability as a place to live and work, warrants sound planning as to when, where and how the community develops in the future.

Through the course of the long-range planning and public involvement processes for this Comprehensive Plan, residents of Huntsville expressed their pride in the community but also their concern for its ability to absorb expected university-driven growth, maintain a vibrant and appealing downtown, protect its treasured neighborhoods – and revitalize those that have experienced decline, better preserve its forested setting along major corridors and on individual development sites, and improve how it manages the impacts of development on surrounding properties and areas. In some cases there is fundamental disagreement about how best to go about addressing these community values, including the proper role of City government and the extent to which regulation should be used.

As in many other communities, maintaining Huntsville's small town flavor is a supreme priority, along with safeguarding its historic yet dynamic character. Many also wish to more fully embrace their hometown university, Sam Houston State, by establishing even stronger physical ties between the campus and surrounding community, particularly to downtown along Sam Houston Avenue, and by better integrating students into Huntsville through their housing arrangements, safer travel around town, and more local employment and entertainment options. As the university's 2001 Campus Master Plan states: "Campus and community interface, relations and synergy are, or should be, topical concerns in any consideration of one or the other as we look to the future. Dependence of one on the other is not an issue; coupling of assets, talents, and synergies are, however, and always will be."

The City of Huntsville's Strategic Plan of 2006 focuses on a set of fundamental themes that are prerequisites to a quality community, all of which are likewise reflected in this Comprehensive Plan and Land Use & Community Character element. Among these themes are:

- ◆ public health and safety;
- ◆ economic prosperity;
- ◆ quality, affordable housing;
- ◆ an attractive city;
- ◆ great parks;
- ◆ educational and cultural opportunities;
- ◆ historic resources;
- ◆ best in class public services; and
- ◆ a well-managed and well-planned community.

The challenge for Huntsville is to achieve and maintain consensus on the best combination of market-based, incentive-based and regulation-based mechanisms it should employ to move the community forward toward its long-term goals, particularly in the arena of land use and development.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this element of the Huntsville Horizon Comprehensive Plan is to establish the necessary policy guidance to enable the City of Huntsville to plan effectively for future growth, development and redevelopment. Sound planning is essential to ensure that the community is prepared for anticipated growth, can serve it adequately with public services, and can manage its impacts to maintain compatibility of land uses and preserve community character.

The concepts of land use and community character are central and integral to other components of the Comprehensive Plan. For instance, the transportation network provides access to land, which influences the type and density of development. The provision or lack of utilities can also dictate the amount, location and timing of development. Design and development character impact community aesthetics and, thus, the perceptions held by area residents and those considering investment in the community. Proximity to public facilities can impact public health and safety at specific locations and, as a result, impact the development potential of an area.

The preparation of this chapter involved examination of the community's past growth; the existing pattern and character of development; and development

#### THE CITY OF HUNTSVILLE



#### STRATEGIC PLAN 2006

The City of Huntsville is a community that is beautiful, historic, culturally diverse, affordable, safe and well planned with great opportunity for our citizens.

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constraints such as government-owned lands and flood-prone areas. As a result of these planning considerations, the alternatives regarding land use and future growth were evaluated and compared against the projected future population, economic development priorities, and other essential factors. The vision as to how Huntsville will develop in the future was also formed by the concerns and ideas expressed by residents during focus group interviews, ward-level community meetings, special forums addressing economic development and Sam Houston State University, and a series of working meetings with a Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee.

This chapter begins by outlining the key issues relating to the community's existing and future land use and character. This is followed by a series of goals, objectives and specific action recommendations to effectively guide ongoing land use and community character decisions and management.

### COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Throughout this chapter the term “community character” is used. Community character goes beyond typical classification of land uses to also account for the physical traits one can see in an area. Typical land use classifications such as residential, commercial, office, industrial and public/quasi-public indicate the general functional use of land. But a community character approach also encompasses such factors as development density (generally determined by lot and building size), intensity (floor area or building coverage), ratios of open space and impervious cover, and the amount of vegetation or volume of landscaping. It is this combination of basic land use and the characteristics of such use that more accurately captures the look and feel of an area. As an example, both Elkins Lake in south Huntsville and The Avenues area in central Huntsville are used primarily for single-family residential, yet these areas exhibit very different characters. Simply conducting an inventory of uses and classifying them according to their functional type does not account for the widely varying characteristics which determine the physical character that is portrayed and experienced. Therefore, this chapter examines the generalized use of land in Huntsville along with its character (more details on the various character categories are provided toward the end of this chapter).

To protect and enhance Huntsville's character as it grows and changes, this plan articulates the land use components and development design elements that contribute to its desired small-town atmosphere. Once the Comprehensive Plan establishes overall goals and strategies, the City's Development Code should be amended to ensure that new development and redevelopment occur in a manner that is consistent with the vision of this plan – and, more importantly, the community.

**Community character** is a system for evaluating the features of individual developments that collectively contribute to the overall character of the community. The components that distinguish the quality of development include more than its use, such as the amount of preserved open space and vegetation, the amount of imperviousness, the orientation of buildings and parking areas, and the relationship of buildings (scale and bulk) to the site. Together with aesthetic enhancements such as the design of buildings, landscaping and screening, sign control, and site amenities, the community character may be significantly improved.

"There are many advantages to a land use system based on character versus use and density, including the ability to manage community character by incorporating performance standards into the zoning ordinance, improved compatibility, increased certainty as to the intensity of neighboring development, buffering based on use intensity and scale, added flexibility of varying development types within the character districts, and less process related to zone change requests and plan amendments."

- Lane Kendig

The purpose of this Code is the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. This purpose is met by... guiding, through the establishment of performance standards, the type, distribution, and intensity of development.

*Section 101.2, Purpose, City of Huntsville Development Code*

### ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout the Comprehensive Plan process, particularly the various public forums and stakeholder input sessions, a number of concerns and aspirations were expressed regarding the future growth and development of Huntsville and its influence on community character. These discussions formed the basis of the following issue statements, along with analysis of the existing land use character, examination of expected future growth trends, and assessment of the factors influencing the pattern of development. The purpose of these statements is to summarize and bring focus to the Comprehensive Plan regarding the community's values, expectations and priorities for land use and community character. Following the identification of the key issues is a set of community goals and objectives along with discussion of necessary implementation steps.

#### Taking Care of the Basics

Like most places, Huntsville officials and residents wish to see a community that is economically healthy, attractive for business investment, and affordable and appealing as a place to live and play. But in a relatively conservative environment and a City with limited planning staff, Huntsville must decide where on the regulatory spectrum it can best position itself to work toward this vision while not exceeding the community's capacity and comfort level for regulation.

Huntsville faces typical growth and development issues for a community of its size and location:

- ♦ more residential development occurring in fringe, greenfield locations than in more centrally-located areas that could support in-fill and already have access to existing utility infrastructure, streets, schools, and other public services;
- ♦ retail development occurring primarily along major highways and corridors, adding more traffic to these busy areas and potentially altering the community's character and image through the scale and appearance of such development and the frequent displacement of pre-existing vegetation;
- ♦ lack of significant new housing construction in price ranges affordable to lower- and middle-income buyers, which can also lead to a proliferation of manufactured homes in and around the community;
- ♦ some older neighborhoods already in or at risk of decline due to population loss, dilapidated structures and vacant lots, lack of proper maintenance on some properties, absentee ownership and other property issues, needed infrastructure upgrades, criminal activity, and perceived or real problems with public school quality; and,
- ♦ retail leakage and loss of some jobs and residents to nearby cities that are better positioned for economic success given location and other advantages.



Huntsville is also in the enviable – and challenging – position of hosting a state university that is poised to add several thousand more students and grow past the 20,000 mark in the near future. The potential for the future Interstate 69 and Interstate 14 corridors to end up in close proximity to Huntsville could also have significant implications for the community’s long-term growth outlook.

Given these prospects, Huntsville must have a sound set of plan implementation tools to safeguard public health and safety and manage growth to the best of its ability within the constraints placed on local governments by Texas state law. Such tools include an up-to-date and clear development regulations, particularly to apply within the ETJ; other pertinent development codes (e.g., signs, landscaping); a well-prepared, multi-year Capital Improvements Program; and, a three-year annexation plan if and when the City is in a position to incorporate additional territory.

During the comprehensive planning process, residents expressed their desire for more business activity in Huntsville to attract and retain younger residents and to bolster the city’s tax base, especially given the extent of tax-exempt land in the area. Others pointed to the need for more housing variety to serve different life-cycle stages, including entry-level housing for workers and smaller, more affordable units for retired individuals on fixed incomes. Ongoing retail and restaurant/entertainment development is particularly desired by some who see consumer spending flowing out of the area, plus the convenience and job opportunities for students and others that more local retail activity would bring. But others are concerned by talk of additional retail development when Huntsville has older commercial areas with vacant or underutilized buildings and previous planned developments that were not successful.

As the community considers how best to address these needs and desires, City officials and staff also remain cognizant of regulatory and process concerns. Complaints about the cost and difficulty of meeting City requirements and wading through development review and approval procedures are common in most every community. But for the City of Huntsville, it is a question of whether its current codes are effective in achieving compatibility of land uses and beneficial development outcomes in all areas of the community. Some suggested the City move toward more of an incentive-based approach to ease compliance and promote better site design. Whatever course it pursues, the City recognizes the fine line that all municipalities in Texas must walk by not raising their standards to the point that much new development shifts toward locations just outside the city limits to avoid City regulations (and possibly higher tax and/or utility rates).



Interstate 69 will be a 1,600-mile facility connecting from Port Huron, Michigan through East Texas to the Texas-Mexico border.

“Zoning in Huntsville is about what you can’t do rather than what you can do.”

- Citizen Comment

"Few University campus environments are as contained, unified, orderly or convenient as SHSU is or could be. It is an advantage of considerable value that a student can walk to any campus destination in less than 10 minutes from a dormitory or parked auto. Here, that is possible."

2001  
Campus Master Plan  
Sam Houston State  
University

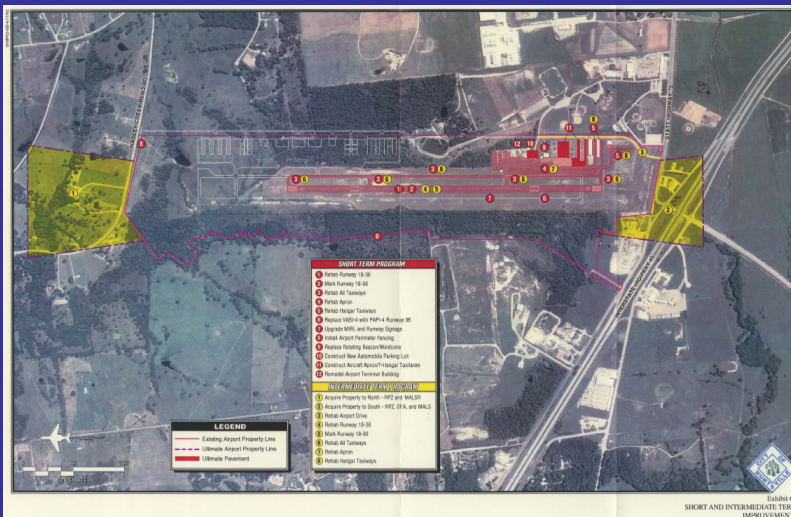
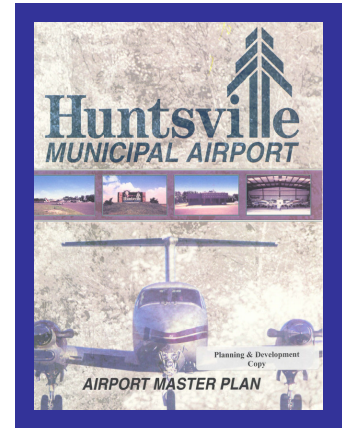


### Protecting Economic Assets

Given its dependence on several large public institutions – Sam Houston State University (SHSU) and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) – for much of its economic base, Huntsville must direct its efforts toward protecting the viability of these economic anchors, along with several other mainstays of the local economy. These other key components include downtown Huntsville, the Interstate 45 corridor and other major roadways through the community, and the Municipal Airport.

Coordinated planning between the City and its partner institutions in SHSU and TDCJ is essential in so many areas – traffic circulation, parking, housing, public safety, aesthetics – but particularly in the area of land use, which drives so many of the other issues. Given the extent of area land that is devoted to tax-exempt uses, it is even more important to know about and mutually assess significant development or redevelopment plans, particularly in the City's core area and around the periphery of these public facilities, where readily developable land is especially scarce.

All indications are that the Municipal Airport will hold its own in coming years but not be a source of significant



The 2003 Airport Master Plan calls for expanded Runway Protection Zones, particularly on the north side of the Municipal Airport (left in this illustration).

growth compared to business-fueled airport expansion in some other southeast Texas communities. Rather, the 2003 Airport Master Plan indicates that more routine runway and facility upgrades should be pursued in a phased manner to keep up with the anticipated needs of business users and general aviation in the immediate area. Some additional land acquisition may be necessary to accommodate the improvements outlined in the master plan. But more essential will be ongoing maintenance of obstruction-free Runway Protection Zones (RPZs) to the

south and especially north of the airport, which is a primary responsibility of the City to maintain compliance with Federal Aviation Administration and Texas Department of Transportation standards. According to the master plan, the City will need to acquire additional property rights in the airport vicinity, either through direct

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property purchases or aviation easements, in order to limit building heights and maintain clear airspace in the airport's immediate area of influence, which will be somewhat expanded based on future facility and operational plans. Fortunately, the airport still has only scattered homesteads and public uses around it, which is a scenario that should be maintained to the extent possible through City planning and regulations, primarily Section 403.2, Airport Hazard District, in the City's Development Code.

Downtown was the focus of much discussion during the comprehensive planning process, as well it should be as one of Huntsville's crown jewels. Many residents cited the need to maintain a multi-purpose and active downtown that accommodates government, retail and entertainment uses amid a historic setting. They also favor continued residential investment in downtown to further enhance its year-round viability. A much-repeated vision is for University Avenue to evolve, through careful planning and design, into a signature corridor in Huntsville that provides a clear physical link between Sam Houston State University and the heart of the community, as well as a focal point for further commercial and residential activity. In general, some wish for central Huntsville to take on more development density, particularly through mixed-use development plans, so the city's core area can become increasingly pedestrian-oriented and transit-supportive. One supportive component could be a parking structure in an appropriate location to reduce the need for surface parking and potentially serve both downtown and university needs, although parking garage financing and feasibility is always a challenge.

"We need to maintain a city with a cohesive center, unlike some other cities."

- Citizen Comment



Finally, with regard to the I-45 corridor and other major roadways through Huntsville, without appropriate land use regulation to direct the desired character and scale of development, these areas will be left largely to market forces, which on a cumulative basis, after site-by-site development and redevelopment choices, may not produce the appearance preferred and envisioned by community residents. The City might follow the lead of other communities who have designated certain corridors as critical to the city's image and economic performance and established corridor overlay districts or other mechanisms to set and clarify certain development standards. In general, it is recognized that these heavily-traveled corridors shape the perceptions of most newcomers and visitors to Huntsville, so it is here where the community must focus on the image it presents, which many residents would prefer to be as green and forested as possible.



### Basic Services

As new development continues to emerge around the edges of Huntsville – and as the City weighs where and when it should use its annexation authority to better manage such fringe growth – it must not overlook the fundamental need to ensure that all existing developed portions of the community have basic City services, particularly water and sanitary sewer service. As several Ward Meeting attendees pointed out, it is a matter of basic equity.

### Balancing Growth and Redevelopment

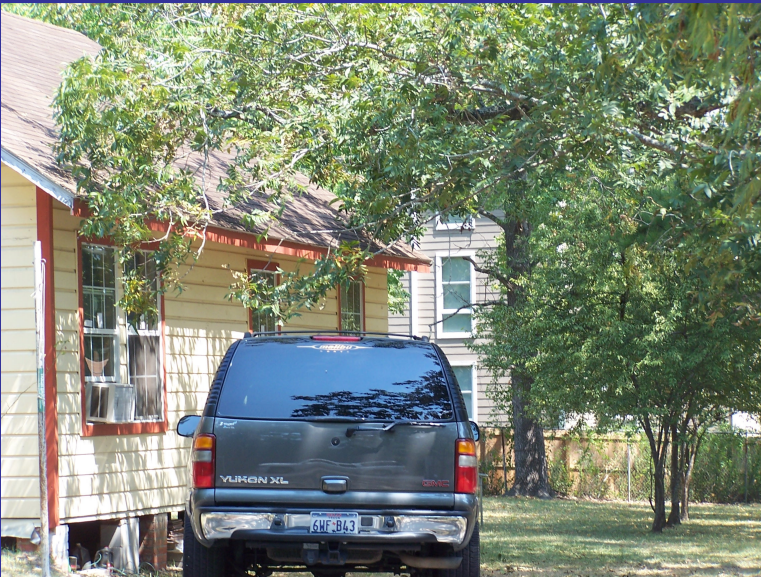
Huntsville has significant long-term growth potential within its city limits, particularly to the west of Interstate 45. Some say it is only a matter of time until Huntsville feels the impact of burgeoning population expansion and land development to the south in Montgomery County and the general growth of the Houston metropolitan area. Huntsville has historically been hemmed in by public lands (prison, university and national forest) and large timber tracts; however some of this land is becoming available for development as timber companies place large tracts on the market and TDCJ considers its long-range needs.

Amid these growth prospects, Huntsville continues to have a largely inward focus in terms of concern for its established neighborhoods and traditional commercial and employment areas. Within neighborhoods, some express concern about the perennial impacts of student housing, either in rental housing situations or through new, large-scale apartment developments. Nearby business and university-related activity, as well as home-based businesses within neighborhoods, have led to car-lined streets in some areas, where parking is at a premium and public safety and residential character are undermined. Others cite their concern about thoroughfare planning and the need for careful consideration of neighborhood integrity when weighing potential ways to improve traffic circulation in the community. Some point

out the pressing need to address the City's older east-side neighborhoods, both in terms of general revitalization and basic public services and improvements. Putting plans and programs in place now for the rehabilitation or demolition of older, unsafe structures, construction of new homes on vacant lots, regulations to protect neighborhood integrity, installation of sidewalks and other pedestrian amenities, and a targeted code enforcement program will be vital to preserving the long-term integrity of these neighborhoods.

Whether it occurs in long-developed areas of the community or in new greenfield developments, some advocates also underscore that basic, affordable housing is clearly needed in Huntsville. Yet this is difficult to achieve when a relatively slow

development pace limits the economies of scale that could be attained through more steady and robust housing construction. The availability of both quality and



A new, large student apartment complex near S. Sam Houston Avenue and State Highway 19 has altered the neighborhood feel for abutting homes along Old Houston Road.

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affordable housing is an important consideration for the community, particularly in light of its desire to attract new business and industry. There must be an adequate supply of housing at different price points to offer new and transitioning residents a choice of living arrangements. This may include, in appropriate locations, homes on smaller lots (such as lot line and village homes), town homes and apartments, and manufactured homes, as well as executive home sites. Each neighborhood should also have access to desirable amenities such as close proximity to schools, neighborhood parks, trails linking to other community destinations, and preserved public open spaces.

Huntsville shares a challenge faced by many Texas cities when it must deal with traffic and other impacts of many people who do not reside there nor contribute to its tax base outside of their local spending, coming into the community each day. Countryside and fringe residential development has a direct impact on the housing environment within the city. Development that is occurring in the outlying areas is doing so for a variety of reasons, including, among others, its rural living environment and avoidance of municipal property taxes and more rigorous building standards. As long as new homes are developed in the peripheral areas that offer more living space and larger lots at a reduced cost – with no apparent drawbacks – it will be more difficult for Huntsville to overcome its housing issues and achieve its objectives.

### Enhancing Character and Image

The physical appearance of a community is perhaps the single most evident glimpse of its economic viability, government pro-activeness, and civic pride. The initial impression of a community is formed by the appearance of its physical development, including the nature of community aesthetics, condition of public facilities and maintenance of roadways, presence of parks and public open spaces, integrity of neighborhoods, care of private and public properties, and overall attractiveness of the community. Community appearance contributes to quality of life for those who reside locally and is a significant consideration for those who may be considering an investment and relocation decision.

While various factors are at play in

The generally accepted definition of affordability is for a household to pay no more than 30 percent of its annual income on housing. Families who pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing are considered cost burdened and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation and medical care.

-HUD Website (2010)



Some site clearing and grading is inevitable to accommodate development in a forested setting. But some residents are concerned when they see wholesale removal of trees on development sites.



"We need to re-expose the natural terrain in Huntsville, especially downtown and on campus."

-Citizen Comment

Huntsville's economic well-being and outlook, some in the community perceive that Huntsville's appearance hurts its growth potential. They wish to see the community re-assert its desire for wide-ranging resource protection, including preservation and enhancement of forested areas, local creeks and waterways, and the natural landscape, as these elements clearly contribute to community character. In addition to aesthetic enhancements such as those described above, the quality of individual developments helps to shape character. The bulk and scale of buildings, placement of parking on a site in relation to the street right-of-way, amount of landscape surface and preserved vegetation relative to impervious surface, and the location and appearance of storage and service areas are all factors that contribute to the character of individual sites and collectively to the overall character of the community.

As discussed previously, the question once again is how far Huntsville is willing to go with regulation, particularly for primarily aesthetic reasons – but ultimately for bottom-line economic reasons?

### GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

The following goals, objectives and recommended actions were formulated to specifically address the issues and needs outlined above, which were culled from extensive community input as well as deliberations of the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee. The goals reflect the overall vision of the community, which may be achieved through the objectives and by acting on the recommendations. It is important to note that these are also general statements of policy that may be cited when approving or denying development proposals and used in making important community investment decisions regarding the provision and timing of facilities and services.

#### GOAL 2.1: Well-managed growth that is fiscally responsible.

- ♦ *Create and implement effective controls for managing incompatible land uses based upon their character, intensities and impacts on adjacent and nearby uses.*
  1. Continue to build upon the City's existing Development Code, which already integrates zoning, subdividing, buffering, landscaping, parking/loading, signs and various other development-related regulations and standards into a Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) format, which many other cities have only recently done or are still hoping to accomplish.
  2. In all review and decision processes covered by the Development Code, include decision criteria for use by the Planning & Zoning Commission and City Council allowing consideration of a multitude of factors, such as the suitability of the use for the property, land uses and character within the surrounding neighborhood, and the extent to which the proposed use is in harmony with or would detrimentally affect adjacent and nearby uses.

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- ♦ *Manage the pattern of development concurrent with the provision of adequate public facilities and services through a combination of incentives and regulations.*
- 3. Incorporate concurrent requirements into the Development Code and the City's utility extension policies, thereby tying land development to concurrent provision of adequate public facilities and services. This is intended to avoid premature urbanization in fringe areas and development outcomes that will cause problems for residents and the City at a later date due to substandard infrastructure and improvements.
- 4. In accordance with Chapter 43, Municipal Annexation, of the Texas Local Government Code, prepare and adopt a municipal annexation plan "that specifically identifies annexations that may occur beginning on the third anniversary of the date the annexation plan is adopted." As required by law, the City must provide full municipal services within two-and-one-half years after the effective date of the annexation, subject to potential time extensions. This planning process would enable the City to gauge its annexation capacity and desired timing. The resulting three-year plan and associated service planning and public hearings would also communicate to property owners and others the City's future intentions regarding growth management (through extension of municipal ordinances) and orderly extension of services.
- 5. Work with Sam Houston State University and interested private landowners and developers toward a potential clustering concept for future off-campus student housing in suitable locations with available and appropriate land, necessary infrastructure and street access, and proximity to recreation and services. This development pattern could more readily be served by transit, would attract complimentary retail and service businesses, and could result in a more unified, master-planned outcome, benefiting both the university and the community.

### GOAL 2.2: Development patterns that promote economic vitality.

- ♦ *Continue to employ performance-based development regulations that provide flexibility for compliance and are more effective in meeting community objectives.*
- 1. Continue to allow a range of development options on individual properties with the use of performance standards to require compatibility for adjacent uses exhibiting varying use intensities. This permits a mixture of land uses subject to integrated design and compatibility standards.
- 2. Review the City's current buffering and landscaping provisions in Chapter 12 of the Development Code, including minimum standards and incentive mechanisms for tree preservation and surplus site landscaping, to

ensure these requirements are still in line with contemporary practices and are producing desired results, particularly given the community's reliance on bufferyards to address land use incompatibilities and potential nuisance conditions.

3. Review in detail the use of buffering and landscaping requirements for multi-story buildings adjacent to low-density and single family residential uses.

♦ *Link the City's land use management efforts to economic fundamentals.*

4. Utilize the City's Capital Improvement Program to influence the locations of development nodes suitable for intensive nonresidential development based upon the availability, sizing and timing of adequate water, wastewater, drainage and transportation improvements. Such programming of capital improvements should be designed and scheduled to accommodate the City's economic development potential. Such strategy is not intended to slow nonresidential development but, rather, to direct development intensity to locations in the community that are suitable and appropriate for such use and where the infrastructure systems may be adequately designed to meet the requisite demands of business and industry.
5. Evaluate the potential use of a fiscal impact model to gauge the economic impact of proposed new development. This would be an important tool to ensure that new development contributes positively to the tax base, offsetting the required expenditures for providing public facilities and municipal services. This could also include a component to gauge the market and economic impact on Downtown caused by business expansion elsewhere in the community.

♦ *Incorporate incentives and flexibility into the City's development regulations to encourage the private marketplace to produce desired outcomes that also satisfy private business objectives.*

6. Incorporate a housing palette into the Development Code, thereby permitting a range of lot sizes within standard residential development, rather than requiring the more rigorous submittal procedures and requirements of a Unified Development for such variation. The lot-size options would be in addition to the current provisions in Table 5-1 of the Development Code for residential lot minimums ranging from 2,400 square feet per unit for rowhouses to 6,000 square feet for urban residential (unless in Neighborhood Conservation), 7,500 square feet for apartments, and three-fifths of an acre for rural residential. Criteria should also be adopted to maintain control over development character, such as an average lot formula, minimum open space ratio, and maximum allowable gross and net density. A palette would provide a wide range of options to housing

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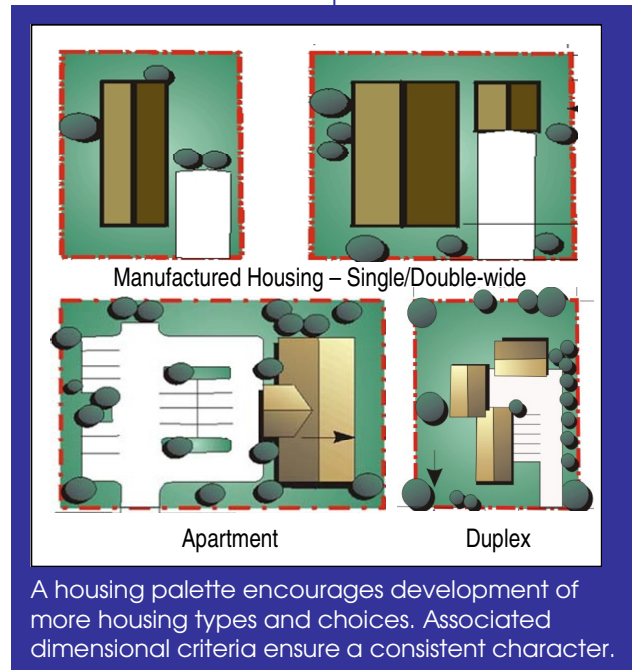
developers, allowing adaptation to market forces and creating opportunity for varying housing styles and price points within the same development. Another benefit of a housing palette is to avoid neighborhood monotony.

7. Adjust the City's Development Code standards to where a Unified, or planned unit, development is a permitted development option, subject to increased design and performance standards. In addition, rather than a flat, uniform percentage-of-open-space requirement, the City should make the required ratio of open space correspond to the increase in density, which secures the character of development. This approach maintains the Suburban or Urban character by increasing the ratio of open space within increased density thereby maintaining control of gross density. The City should also consider requiring a minimum number of housing types within a Unified Development, each with dimensional criteria to preserve development character. With no minimum lot areas, widths or yard requirements there are no certain controls to manage development character other than negotiated approval.

8. Integrate density bonuses directly into the City's Unified Development provisions to encourage this development approach. This strategy would promote development of integrated neighborhoods versus isolated, individual subdivisions and housing complexes. As such developments occur, applicable design standards must ensure this character. For instance, a commercial use within a residential area would be scaled to be compatible with the adjacent residences, with an increased ratio of open space and a floor area ratio to secure the suburban character. Within parts of the Management district, a commercial use would have greater intensity, with a minimum (versus maximum) height, maximum build-to-line rather than a minimum setback, limited open space, and a higher floor area ratio.

- ♦ *Focus particular attention on more effective management of development quality, impacts and aesthetics along Huntsville's major roadway corridors.*

9. Create special performance standards for properties abutting the Interstate 45 corridor, Sam Houston Avenue-U.S. Highway 75, 11<sup>th</sup> Street-U.S. Highway 190 and other high-priority corridors. This may include potential provisions that may be incorporated into the Development Code pertaining to increased landscape surfaces (adjacent to the right-of-way



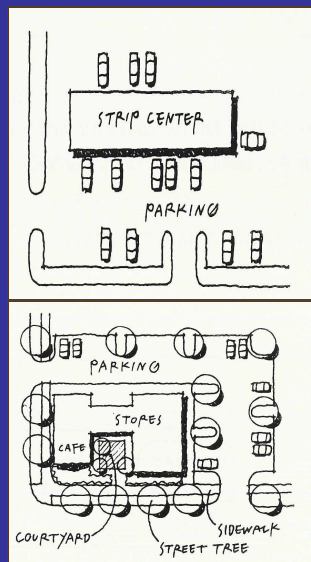
and throughout individual sites); reduced impervious surface coverage; floor area ratios; enhanced requirements for landscaping, screening and buffering between uses; outdoor storage, display and use activity; the type, size, number and placement of signs; outdoor lighting standards; site access and circulation; building placement and orientation; and building design and appearance.

10. For land abutting highways and arterial roads, integrate into the Development Code an allowable increase in density for a specified distance, commonly 300 to 500 feet (and/or further incentivize the use of Section 505.4, Density Increases). This measure is both important and necessary for residential development to occur along major streets where land values are higher due to its major street frontage. Increased density is therefore necessary to offset higher land and development costs.
11. Through the reworking of the City's current zoning districts, adjust the Development Code standards for non-residential uses along key corridors to reduce the minimum front setback from 25 feet and instead institute a maximum build-to line of 10 or 15 feet. At the same time, increase the rear setback from 10 feet to 30 or 40 feet. Include design standards relating to streetscape and property line buffering – and possibly to require monument

signage and set standards to prevent blank walls adjacent to street right-of-way. Shifting a building to the front or side of a site moves it toward the public street or adjacent to a similar use versus nearest an abutting neighborhood. The use of bufferyard standards also mitigates the impacts of parking areas adjacent to residential uses.

- ♦ *Maintain Downtown as an economic activity center and community focal point, including a strong residential component.*

12. Create a variety of destination points within Downtown to attract visitors and passers-by, in addition to regular business owners, workers and patrons. In particular, the presence of City and County government should be maintained and strengthened through future facility planning and service delivery strategies.
13. Maintain the Main Street Program as an essential public-private partnership for the ongoing revitalization of Downtown. This ongoing partnership should include a role for



The use of a build-to line (bottom) versus a large minimum front yard setback shifts the placement of parking, creating a very different corridor environment.



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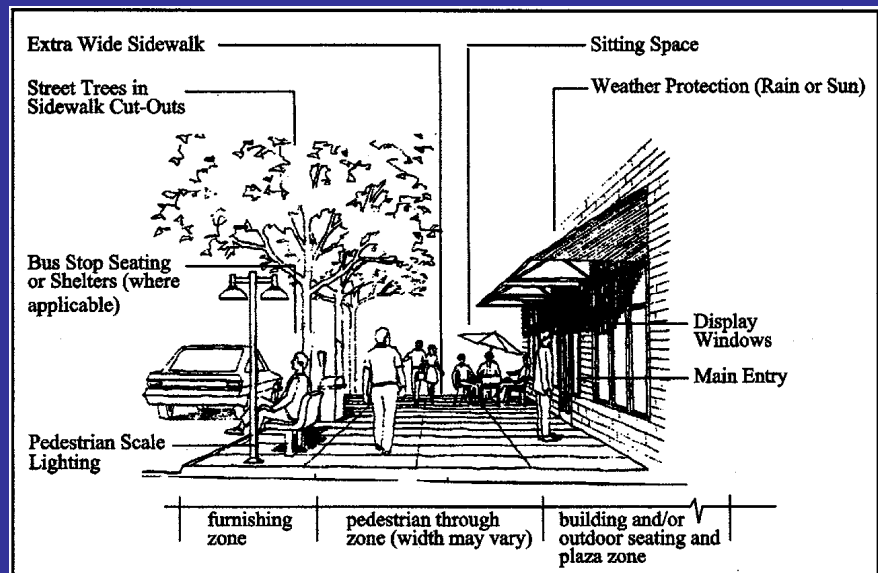
the City in vacating rights-of-way and easements, as necessary; conducting studies on the local market, traffic and parking, and design options; and being a mutual investor in catalyst projects such as a parking garage.

14. Update the Downtown District Standards within the existing Development Code, with height and area regulations suitable to retain the current urban character of Downtown. Specific provisions of the district would include a required build-to-line at the front property line; zero side yard setbacks; minimum two-story building height; allowance of upper-floor residential use and incentives for high-density urban living; and building form requirements and design standards relating to building bulk and scale, historic façade materials and architectural detailing, window and doorway openings, awnings and canopy treatments, and sign placement. The use of design guidelines or standards would preserve and enhance the architectural and historic integrity of buildings within a defined area.
15. Encourage a broad mixture of Downtown uses including offices and retail businesses, service-related establishments, cultural and entertainment activities, and high-density residential use.

To ensure compatible co-existence, establish performance standards regarding lighting, signage, parking and noise, among other locally-determined variables. Also create incentives for the use of upper floors of commercial buildings for residential purposes, including important provisions for reserved resident parking, a blend of uses that offer convenient services, and protection from

nuisances associated with intensive commercial districts. Also seek ways to introduce retirement housing into the Downtown area, thereby offering close proximity to services and community amenities.

16. Through the Development Code, delineate specific boundaries for the Downtown area, within which high-density housing is permitted without encroachment into abutting low-density single-family neighborhoods.



Maintaining a pedestrian-scale streetscape contributes to the enclosure of space that is characteristic of an urban environment. In Downtown Huntsville, zero-setback buildings and storefronts and on-street parking help to establish an urban look and feel.

Within the defined Downtown area, concentrate higher-intensity residential uses with allowances for increased building heights and floor area ratios. Also allow building conversions from single-family to multiple-family dwellings. Higher-density residential uses should be located closer to the commercial center with lower-density uses across the street and adjacent to single-family dwellings, which will mitigate visual impacts and preserve the neighborhood environment. Accessory dwelling units such as a garage apartment or guesthouse, should also be permitted as accessory units to lower-density homes along the Downtown fringe (Development Code Section 401.6, Accessory Units and Buildings, currently allows only nonpaying temporary guest visitation versus permanent occupancy in residential accessory units).

17. Incorporate design standards into the Development Code for residential uses within the Downtown and its defined fringe areas to ensure their appearance reflects a more urban character. Specific performance standards should be created relating to building design and articulation, orientation, height, setbacks, parking, and resident access to ensure compatibility and cohesiveness with the Downtown environment.

18. Transform the existing auto-urban character in portions of Downtown to a more urban environment by infilling vacant parcels; eliminating front building setbacks and parking lots to create increased building enclosure of the public right-of-way; enhancing the pedestrian environment with streetscape improvements; requiring a minimum height of new structures of no less than two stories, with allowances in certain locations for increased height; and attracting uses that are characteristic of a historic center. The intensity of the urban character should be centered at the courthouse square for a distance of at least three or four blocks in all directions, with a lessening of density and intensity outward to the defined edges of the district.



An increased residential presence in Downtown requires sensitivity to parking needs of businesses as well as residents to ensure harmonious mixing of uses at the city's core.

19. Develop design standards for the redevelopment of existing buildings and construction of new buildings to reflect the architectural character reminiscent of remaining buildings and the community's past. Standards should be created for the height and bulk of buildings, their minimum floor area ratio, orientation to the street and sidewalk, allowable building materials, design articulation and fenestration, use of awnings and canopies, style and size of signage, and other building and site features.

## Chapter Land Use & Community

### PLAN2025

"Perhaps we could just add more buffer zones or green spaces between the developments."

- Citizen Comment

20. Create a distinct identity for Downtown, including forming an identifiable physical edge to the district with monuments and gateway treatments at the entries from each direction (particularly along 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Sam Houston Avenue), along with further investment in unifying design elements, such as unique signage and banners, landscaping, decorative lighting, street and sidewalk/crosswalk patterns, and other unique urban design treatments. Also, improve the pedestrian atmosphere with traffic calming measures; street furniture and public art displays; way-finding signage and informational kiosks; public plazas and green spaces; sidewalk cafes and outdoor activity areas; and street vendors.

### GOAL 2.3: A balance of new growth and careful redevelopment within Huntsville.

- ♦ *Pursue available mechanisms, within the Texas statutory context, for better managing fringe growth and development around Huntsville.*
  1. A neighborhood conservation district should be used for existing development in fringe areas, which would allow its continued existence as a conforming use.
  2. Evaluate factors contributing to the extent of housing development occurring in peripheral unincorporated areas. Create in-city development incentives to counter the advantages for locating outside the city limits.
- ♦ *Take steps to protect established neighborhoods in Huntsville and to stabilize and reinvigorate older neighborhoods that have experienced some decline.*
  3. Conduct a detailed land use and zoning study to define the boundaries distinguishing proposed new neighborhood conservation districts in Huntsville. New districts can be established through those neighborhoods with existing deed restrictions and homeowners associations or other distinguishing characteristics. Distinguishing factors could include street and block pattern, lot size, housing style/design, street or alley access, floor area ratio, and landscape volume.
  4. Adopt policies and standards within the Development Code for preserving the integrity and character of established neighborhoods, including compatibility provisions relating to the type and construction of infill housing and other uses on vacant lots. Also consider expanding the range of permitted uses within neighborhood conservation districts (Development Code Section 402.3) to include complimentary non-residential uses such as small-scale neighborhood commercial and office uses that add character, convenience and vitality to a neighborhood.
  5. Create site design and building standards for multiple-family developments to ensure compatibility with abutting uses, including

Requirements are set forth in this section for the provision of buffers between certain land uses. City Council intends that these buffer requirements reduce nuisances between adjacent land uses or between a land use and a public road by separation of land uses through a required buffer. Such nuisances may include dirt, litter, noise, lights, signs, unsightly buildings or parking areas. Buffers provide spacing to reduce potentially adverse impacts of noise, odor, or danger from fires or explosions.

*Section 1202.1, Purpose of Buffer Standards, City of Huntsville Development Code*

**INFILL** is the use of land within a built-up area for further construction, especially as part of a community redevelopment or growth management.

- consideration for varying building heights, similar roof pitch and composition, increased setbacks along shared boundaries, locations of ingress/egress, and adequate buffering and screening.
6. Improve the walkability of neighborhoods through installation of sidewalks concurrent with all new development, plus rehabilitation or construction of sidewalks in older neighborhoods, particularly adjacent to schools and parks. The Development Code should also require public access easements within and between developments to provide connections to public parks, natural areas and open spaces, and an eventual community trail system.
  7. Identify areas of the community that are experiencing or at risk to experience particularly high levels of disinvestment and deterioration, and provide both technical and administrative assistance to aid in redevelopment efforts. Coordinate with area property owners to identify and prioritize needed infrastructure improvements funded by a target-area capital investment program.
  8. Incorporate into the Development Code provisions allowing relief of specified standards that may prevent or add difficulty to the redevelopment process, so long as certain precautions and criteria can be met. These provisions may apply community-wide or within specified boundaries. Common constraints to redevelopment include problems with property ownership and clear title, assembly of numerous small lots into a feasible development site, site access and circulation, limited areas for parking and loading, nonconforming setbacks, and on-site drainage requirements. Certain development-related standards within the Development Code may be acceptable for variations so as not to overburden areas with longstanding redevelopment needs. An incentive-based approach may also be incorporated to encourage investors and developers to tackle the common redevelopment constraints of disadvantaged areas.
  9. Develop a municipal grant program for the rehabilitation of substandard housing units using government-funded programs while also leveraging the value of public dollars with private resources, such as financing institutions and foundation funds. Furthermore, establish an education and awareness program to inform persons with limited income about various programs available for rehabilitation assistance.
  10. Utilize Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to leverage the amount of reinvestment and to implement projects and programs, such as infrastructure repair, park development or improvement, or removal of unsafe structures, aiming to eliminate blight and improve neighborhood conditions in areas of low to moderate income.
  11. Assist residents of older areas with formation of official neighborhood organizations. City staff or legal volunteers may offer assistance in drafting deed restrictions that may be adopted by individual neighborhood

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associations to restrict and enforce certain uses and conditions. Participation in neighborhood improvement and revitalization efforts may also be initiated by churches, civic organizations, schools and businesses through programs such as neighborhood clean-up, home improvement, and beautification.

12. Create a pro-active program for handling the condemnation, demolition and/or rehabilitation of substandard structures and underdeveloped property. Revise local health, building and development codes, as needed, to streamline the process for addressing unsafe or dilapidated structures and other potential health and safety risks, such as inoperable vehicles, weeds and heavy trash, and overgrown sites and run-down structures used for criminal activity.
  13. Establish a pro-active code enforcement program that first offers helpful assistance to property owners in complying with municipal codes rather than a punitive approach.
  14. Create incentives such as permit streamlining, fee waivers, tax deferral and infrastructure cost-sharing for builders and organizations that provide infill construction on vacant lots or parcels in a manner that compliments the surrounding neighborhood. To ensure consistency and compatibility of infill units, establish design guidelines that address building materials, roof pitch, façade treatment, porches, proportional dimensions, and other elements to ensure that new development and rehabilitation maintains or enhances neighborhood character.
  15. Assist in creation of Community Development Corporations (CDCs) that, as nonprofit organizations, can implement neighborhood revitalization projects and programs. Consider the necessity of developing specialized CDCs, such as a Community Housing Development Organization (CHDO), to best address housing issues.
- ♦ *Broaden the range of housing types and price diversity to meet the affordability needs of the population.*
16. Work with local lenders to form low interest loan pools to be used for housing rehabilitation.
  17. Incorporate an inclusionary housing provision, with density bonuses where the housing is subsidized by a state or federal, affordable or low- and moderate-income housing program. Establish proportional limitations based upon the total number of units in the development, e.g. no more than 30 percent for a development of 50 to 199 units.
  18. Include a provision of market housing whereby a percentage of the units are reduced in price to make them more affordable than the average market units. Require demonstration that the bonus density is used to lower the costs of land and infrastructure. Establish criteria regarding



**Industrialized housing** is a residential structure that is constructed in one or more modules built off-site and erected on a permanent foundation system.



Development clustering – as an innovative subdivision design technique – allows conservation of sensitive environment resources and preservation of valuable open space while maintaining an equivalent development density.

similar design and finishes of affordable units.

19. Allow accessory units within residential district(s), which are exempt when determining the allowable density in the district. Add ordinance provisions specifying the maximum allowable floor area as a percentage of the floor area of the principal unit or as a percentage of the overall lot area. Design standards are also necessary to ensure compatibility with adjacent structures.
20. Develop standards for the provision of small family units for seniors, individuals, or new families with no more than two people. Greatly reduced lot areas per unit may be allowed with floor area ratios and spacing standards. Require issuance of an annual permit to allow regular inspection for program compliance.
21. Establish standards for industrialized housing, including a value equal to or greater than the median taxable value of each single-family dwelling within 500 feet; requiring exterior siding, roofing, roof pitch, foundation fascia, and fenestration (design and position of windows in a building) compatible with other dwellings; and requiring compliance with all applicable dimensional requirements.

**GOAL 2.4: Development and resource protection outcomes that preserve and bolster community character.**

♦ *Use the community's official zoning map and associated regulations to encourage development practices and outcomes more consistent with Huntsville's desired character.*

1. Incorporate provisions in the Development Code, such as Planned Unit Development, that would permit and encourage alternative subdivision design in appropriate areas, including development clustering (30 percent open space), conservation development (50 percent open space), and preservation development (80 percent open space). This approach allows the developer and landowner an equivalent (or higher) development yield in terms of gross units per acre. But the development is concentrated in a smaller area of the site rather than spread across the site as would occur through a conventional design. This is accomplished through smaller lot sizes, reduced building setbacks, increased floor area ratios, and added flexibility in other standards in exchange for setting aside more open space and preserving natural areas such as floodplains, wetlands, creek buffers and forested areas. In other words, resource preservation (or any other defined performance standard) is rewarded with incentives – or bonuses– allowing an equivalent development density (a site capacity calculation may be incorporated into the requirements to allow for adjustments in development intensity based on actual site conditions). The outcome is development that maintains its efficiency, thereby meeting the objectives of the developer and

## Chapter Land Use &amp; Community

landowner while also addressing community priorities for character enhancement and resource protection. This regulatory strategy can also open up development possibilities for constrained sites in urban areas – where only conventional designs would pass muster under typical development ordinances – as well as sites that are adjacent to railroads, well sites or other less desirable features. Such alternative neighborhood environments can also assist a community such as Huntsville to maintain its small town character and protect its rural edge while still accommodating new development.

- ♦ *Use the City's development regulations to directly prevent and/or mitigate adverse impacts on Huntsville's natural features and assets.*
- 2. Expand resource protection standards within the Development Code to preserve stands of existing vegetation, which form effective natural buffers within and between uses. Preserved vegetation would be required to meet certain standards of performance, such as opacity and vegetation density, as a means of avoiding conflict between incompatible land uses.
- 3. Protect existing trees on properties and along streets by incorporating stricter provisions for tree preservation into the Development Code (beyond those currently provided in Chapter 12, Landscaping, Bufferyard, Park and Open Space Standards). Also adopt street repair and improvement specifications that, to the maximum extent practicable, will not disrupt the drip line of existing trees, including provisions for protective construction fencing, limitations on grade changes, and prohibition of storing or dumping materials. Furthermore, adopt landscaping provisions requiring the installation of street trees and on-lot trees in new subdivisions.
- 4. Pursue open space preservation within adjacent development, dedication of conservation easements or fee simple acquisition of land near valued creeks and water bodies to protect these water resources from the impacts of urban development, including increased erosion and flooding, water pollution, and loss of natural protective buffers. This would also preserve the positive visual amenity such natural areas provide. The provisions should also require dedication of public access easements along natural features and linear greenways to promote recreational opportunities and to enable new developments to comply with parkland dedication requirements.
- 5. Investigate the community's potential support for or discomfort with a



Preserving trees and natural areas gives character to the community. Trees also moderate the micro-climate, particularly during the warm summer months, and make neighborhoods more comfortable.

possible limitation on wholesale clearing and grading of vacant sites prior to processing and final approval of development applications and zone change requests. Such restrictions could potentially be limited to certain designated, high-priority corridors versus being applied on a community-wide basis.

## EXISTING LAND USE INVENTORY

Reflected in **Figure 2.1, 2007 Community Character**, is not only a snapshot of the use of land in and around Huntsville in 2007, but also the character of this land use based on the community character types described later in this chapter. The land uses and character types depicted on the map are as follows:

- ◆ Vacant
- ◆ Estate
- ◆ Single-Family
- ◆ Multi-Family
- ◆ Auto-Commercial
- ◆ Central Business District Industrial
- ◆ Institutional
- ◆ Parks and Recreation
- ◆ Rural and Agricultural

In addition, **Figure 2.2, Huntsville Annexation History**, illustrates the gradual but substantial expansion of the community's incorporated area since the 1840s, including significant annexations to the south and northwest since 1990.

## FUTURE LAND USE

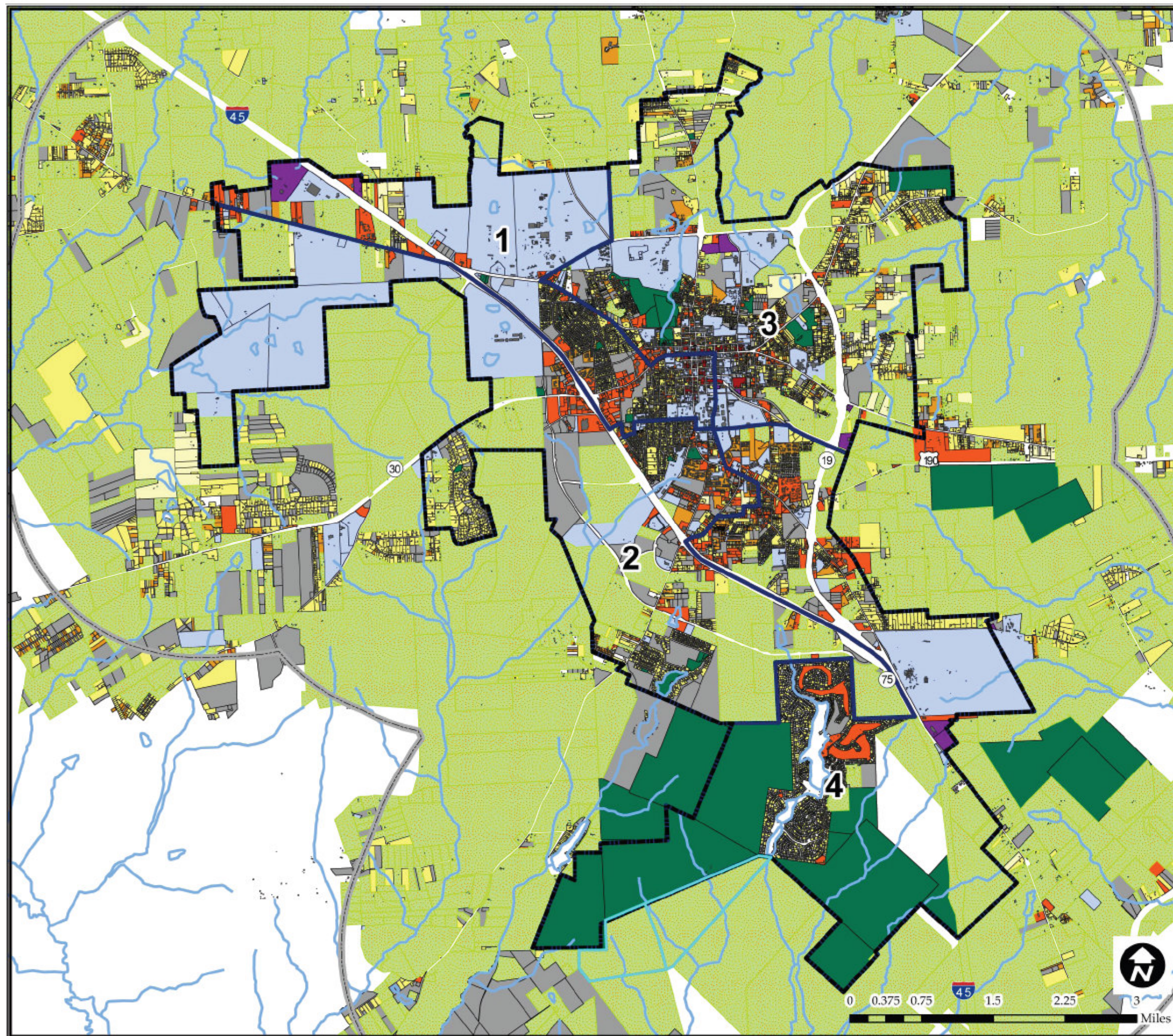
The essence of comprehensive planning is a recognition that Huntsville does not have to wait and react to growth and development. Rather, it can determine where growth will occur and what character this new development will reflect. Through active community support, the Comprehensive Plan will ensure that development meets certain standards and, thus, contributes to achieving the desired community character. The findings and recommendations contained within this comprehensive plan provide the basis for the City's development ordinances as the primary tools to implement the plan.

### District Specifications

Currently the City is divided into three zoning districts, as follows:
















- ◆ **Management district (M)** is the principal district which allows all development subject to standards relating to accessory uses and buildings; home occupations; the flood and airport hazard overlay districts; and the lot design, arrangement,





**Figure 2.1**  
**2007**  
**Community**  
**Character**

**Legend**

-  Council Wards
-  City Limits
-  Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Boundary (ETJ)
-  Streams
-  Buildings
- Community Character**
-  Vacant
-  Estate
-  Single-Family
-  Multi-Family
-  Auto Commercial
-  Central Business District
-  Industrial
-  Institutional
-  Parks and Recreation
-  Rural and Agricultural

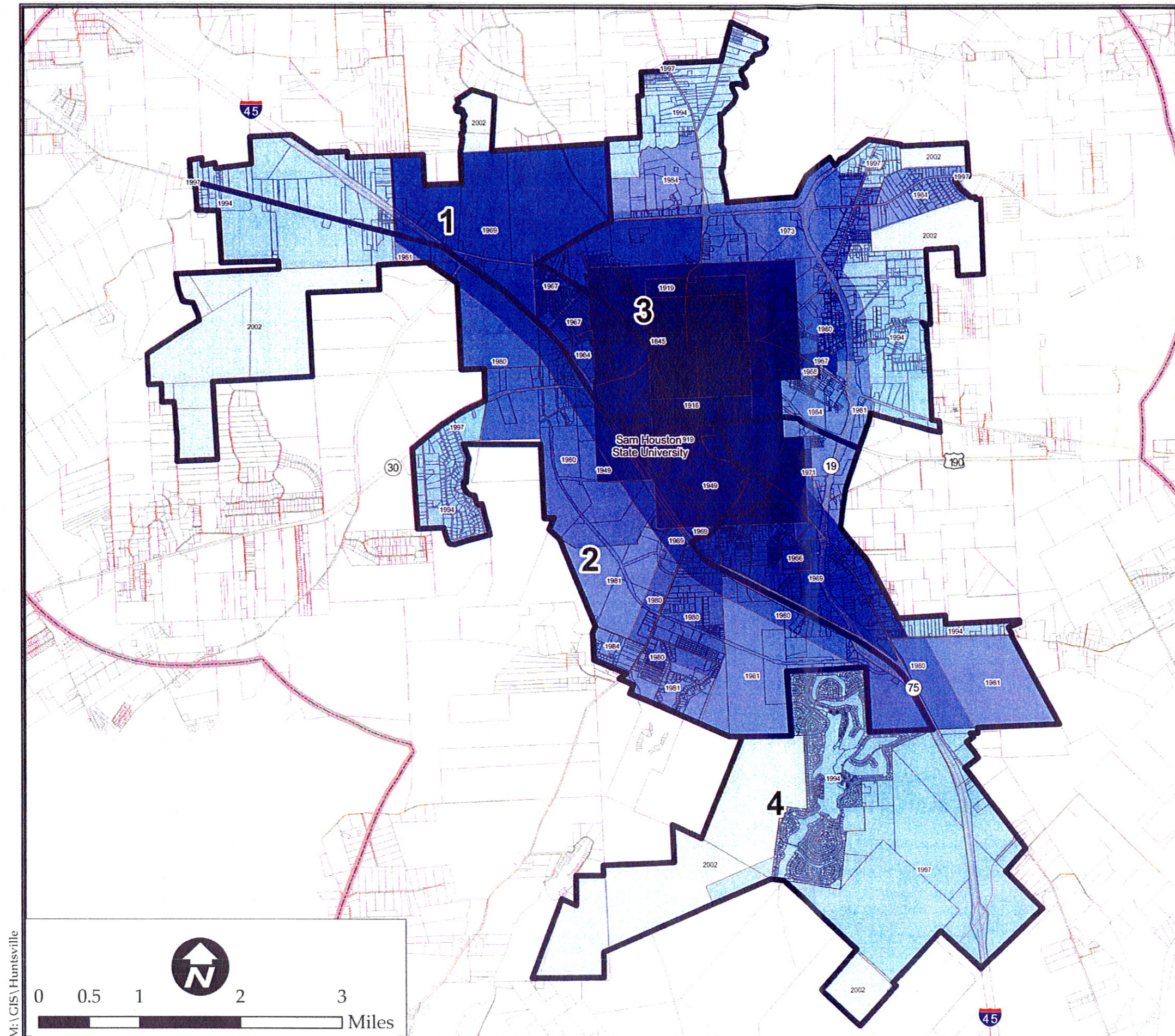


**KENDIG KEAST**  
COLLABORATIVE

Adopted: April 10, 2007  
Amended: June 15, 2010



**Figure 2.2**  
**Annexation**  
**History**



**Legend**

- Council Wards
- City Limits
- Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Boundary (ETJ)
- County Roads

**Annexation Areas**

- 2001 - 2010
- 1991 - 2000
- 1981 - 1990
- 1971 - 1980
- 1961 - 1970
- 1951 - 1960
- 1940 - 1950
- 1910 - 1920
- 1840 - 1850



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and layout requirements.

- ♦ **Downtown district (D)** is the area encompassing the courthouse and the central business district. This district is intended for greater intensity and, thus, exempts the uses from off-street parking requirements. This district allows a broad range of uses including all types of residential uses, commercial service and retail uses, and industrial uses such as construction, manufacturing, and wholesale trade.
- ♦ **Neighborhood conservation (NC)** is exclusively for single-family residential dwellings. Within this district there are restrictions as to the type of allowable uses and other requirements to “conserve the character and value of buildings and building sites existing in these areas and to protect the integrity of the neighborhood.”

While the current Development Code establishes residential lot sizes for rural (six-tenth acre), urban (6,000 square feet), multi-family (1,500 square feet per dwelling unit), garden/patio homes (5,000 square feet), and townhouse (2,400 square feet per dwelling unit), there is no relationship to the development character due to the span of uses and intensities allowed within each of the districts.

### LAND USE POLICIES

The Huntsville Horizon Comprehensive Plan is intended to be used as a policy framework to guide development and redevelopment in a manner that will positively contribute to the community’s character and, hence, economic development, environmental sensitivity, and livability. Well-managed growth and orderly development leads to more effective use of limited public funds in providing adequate public services and needed capital improvements. Through pro-active and effective land use planning, design, and regulation, the City may fulfill its primary responsibility to promote the public health, safety and welfare of the community and its residents.

The following Land Use policy statements indicate the City’s intentions for managing its future growth and development character. These policies reflect the future vision of the community and its desired land use pattern. Together with the recommendations outlined above, these policy statements will serve to guide decision-making by the Planning & Zoning Commission and City Council as they implement this Comprehensive Plan.

1. Development should not occur within floodplains unless there is compliance with stringent floodplain management practices to maintain adequate capacity for storage and conveyance of flood waters.
2. The City’s land use pattern should focus new development and significant redevelopment where adequate public services and utility capacity are already

in place or projected for improvement, including streets, water, wastewater and drainage infrastructure.

3. Development should be focused first on vacant areas within the existing developed area and/or areas contiguous to the community's existing developed area, and planned to occur sequentially outward as adequate facilities are available.
4. Development patterns should provide for transitions and buffering between various land use intensities. Where land uses of incompatible intensities abut, there should be adequate bufferyards to separate them.
5. Residential areas should not be situated next to intense nonresidential uses without provisions for increased separation and bufferyards. Less intense nonresidential development may be appropriate next to residential development with performance standards to mitigate adverse impacts.
6. Neighborhoods should be designed with a variety of housing types and sizes thereby offering affordable living options in all areas.
7. Development form should be such that neighborhoods are highly walkable, meaning there is a mixture of uses within convenient distance to where automobiles are not essential for relatively short trips. Appropriate standards should be in place to ensure the compatibility and visual cohesiveness of mixed-use development, with provisions for buffering and impact mitigation.
8. New development or redevelopment in developed areas should maintain compatibility with existing uses and the prevailing land use pattern in the area.
9. Areas of historic value should be maintained and enhanced in accordance with preservation guidelines and development standards.
10. Multiple-family housing should be developed at a density and scale that is compatible with the surrounding neighborhood and available utilities and roadway capacity. Larger multi-family developments should be located on sites with adequate space for off-street parking, accessory structures, and recreational activity, and toward the edge of single-family residential areas where higher traffic generation and taller building heights can be better accommodated.
11. Uses that commonly have moderate- to large-scale assemblies of people such as churches, funeral homes, membership organizations, and other institutions, should be appropriately located on adequate-size parcels with sufficient space to accommodate the off-street parking and accessory needs. Such uses should be located so as to minimize any adverse or undue significant burden on adjacent or adjoining land uses, as well as that portion of the street network.
12. Commercial development should be concentrated in nodes at major intersections and other appropriate locations along highway frontages and primary roadways,

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as opposed to scattered and/or strip development, to encourage more integrated and pedestrian-oriented commercial settings and to maintain safe and efficient traffic flow on major roadways.

13. Smaller-scale neighborhood retail and service uses should be located at intersections of collector and arterial streets and at the edge of logical neighborhood areas – or within neighborhoods where suitable sites exist and conditions are appropriate to balance compatibility with convenience.
14. Industrial activities should be conducted within enclosed structures, whenever possible, and outdoor activities and/or storage should be properly screened from public view.
15. Less intensive industrial and heavy commercial development should be encouraged in high-quality business park settings (e.g., master-planned design, enhanced building exteriors, increased landscaping and amenities, and more open space).
16. Redevelopment of abandoned industrial sites should consider the nature and character of the existing adjacent development, with adequate provisions and precautions so as not to cause undue impacts or burdens. Where feasible, consideration should be given for reuse as public open space.
17. The area around the existing airport or any future airports should be reserved for appropriate uses, such as industrial development, that are less affected by aircraft noise. Any development that encroaches into the defined noise area should be of limited density and meet standards of construction for noise reduction as well as any applicable height restrictions.
18. Development near community entrances should be suburban or rural in character, or enhanced via regulations and standards. The latter may be handled through overlay zoning provisions.
19. Development of land along area creeks and other water bodies and their riparian edges should be sensitive to these natural resources. Spring and wellhead areas, wetlands, and other environmentally sensitive or valuable areas should also be reserved as natural areas and greenbelt preserves for wildlife and recreation, whenever possible, and used as open space buffers between incompatible land uses, whenever appropriate.
20. Space should be maintained adjacent to each significant natural drainage course so as to facilitate future development of walkways and trails in and around the community.

Effective Plan Implementation and  
Prudent Use of Development Regulations

Communities that are successful in achieving their vision are those that have established a collective vision, formed consensus, and are committed to action. Without this resolve, plans are largely ineffective and lack the support necessary to realize the community's stated goals and objectives. Therefore, in order to achieve desirable development outcomes, there must be a firm commitment to abide by the goals and recommendations of this plan.

The goals, objectives and recommended actions are intended to provide the guidance necessary to achieve the preferred type, pattern and density of future development, as well as the envisioned character of the community. As conditions change over time, the plan will require periodic review and amendment to continue to reflect the City's economic development objectives, growth policies and regulations, and other long-range planning considerations.

Directly associated with the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan is the enactment of appropriate incentives, standards and regulations to ensure compliance with the City's policies and overall community vision. While regulations impose certain restrictions on the use of land, in the interest of all persons and the community as a whole, they are an essential component for realizing many of the values and priorities expressed by individuals and groups during this planning process. Regulations that are enacted must be reasonable, fair and equally applied – and effective in achieving a specific public purpose. There must also be diligence in their enforcement to maintain a level playing field and protect the interests of all persons and not just those who are nearby or adjacent to the use.

There are a variety of methods available to enact control and, thus, manage development in a responsible manner. The approach taken is fully in the hands of the community and its leadership. While there are traditional means that are common among other communities, there are also creative variations that can be customized to address the specific issues and desired outcomes of a particular community. The content of this chapter establishes a firm foundation and policy framework to support whichever implementation strategy the community chooses to pursue.

### COMMUNITY CHARACTER TYPES

Huntsville has identified its desired future vision as an economically balanced, highly attractive, family-oriented, small-town community. To implement this vision, this statement of future intent must be converted into land use policies and development regulations that produce the desired outcomes, on a site-by-site basis as well as cumulatively over the longer term. A community character analysis was used to characterize existing development and to document the land use patterns and



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design elements that form the character of individual developments and the community as a whole. This approach allows the formulation of standards to achieve the desired community character.

Most of the community character types described below are present in Huntsville with varying degrees of significance, as depicted in Figure 2.1, including:

- ◆ central business district (CBD) character around the Downtown square and along some adjacent streets;
- ◆ auto commercial nature of commercial development along the Interstate 45 corridor and 11<sup>th</sup> Street and, to a lesser extent, along other arterial roadways;
- ◆ single-family character of older, established neighborhoods with smaller lots and homes in central Huntsville;
- ◆ multi-family neighborhoods near the SHSU campus and north of the I-45/11<sup>th</sup> Street interchange, where apartment complexes and higher-density housing are the dominant residential use;
- ◆ suburban character of areas such as Elkins Lake and other subdivisions to the west of I-45, where single-family homes are situated on moderately-sized lots, but are also near golf courses or other common open space that contributes to the less intensive development setting;
- ◆ extensive acreage in and around the community devoted to institutional uses, primarily by SHSU in the central city and TDCJ to the northwest and southeast;
- ◆ some areas of estate-scale properties scattered around the fringes of Huntsville;
- ◆ sparsely developed countryside and agricultural lands to the north and west of Huntsville, as well as under TDCJ ownership and use; and
- ◆ natural areas within the Sam Houston National Forest to the south and east of the community.



Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) facilities are a significant land use feature in and around Huntsville.

The range of community character types and their functions are as follows:

### Central Business District Character

Central Business District CBD areas are historically the center of commerce, government, culture and entertainment in a community. The features that contribute to a CBD character similar to that found in Downtown Huntsville are the proximity of uses to the public ways, with little or no building setbacks, and a strong pedestrian orientation at the sidewalk level. An urban center is designed with an intensity of use to draw people into close contact, where congestion and

personal encounters are both expected and essential for a vibrant community center.

Central Business District spaces are architectural, meaning that they are enclosed by buildings. The width of a downtown street in relation to the height of abutting structures is essential for creating a CBD environment. This environment is formed in sections of Downtown where a two-story building face abuts a moderately wide pedestrian pathway (sidewalk) and a roadway narrowed by on-street parking.



Urban Character

Images of Huntsville's urban past remain in the Downtown Square and the block faces around it. However, the CBD character has been replaced by an auto commercial character on some nearby blocks as older buildings have been removed and streets have been widened over the years to accommodate higher traffic volumes and turning movements. An auto commercial character begins to predominate as a result of single-story building heights, increased building setbacks, parking lots abutting the street right-of-way, and signage that is oriented to the attention of the passing automobile.

The core of Downtown Huntsville reflects a CBD character as a result of its high floor-to-site area ratios with zero setbacks along the street front, uses that are common in today's downtown environments, and a mixed pedestrian and vehicular orientation. The CBD character could be further enhanced by an increase in population and employment density; extending the urban building form over a larger area through infill development or redevelopment; raising the front facades of one-story buildings when abutted by two-story buildings to either side; enhancing the pedestrian orientation in a broader area with appropriately scaled streetscape improvements, awnings or canopies, and projecting business signs; and creating public plazas and gathering areas. Downtown's CBD character could also be nurtured by developing new buildings on existing parking lots, or with an elevated parking structure with potential for retail uses on the first floor and offices or residential units wrapped around the exterior. The height and scale of the buildings along with zero or limited street setbacks, creation of pedestrian precincts and public spaces, and an enhanced architectural appearance would facilitate an urban feel.

The potential for a CBD University district is intended to replicate these types of physical characteristics around – but not necessarily on – campus, although the SHSU core campus area definitely has CBD features. This may be accomplished with

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higher residential densities and an increased intensity of mixed use. To promote urban living and walking in close proximity to the campus, taller residential buildings should have first-floor retail uses, thereby offering convenient services to student residents. An urban-scaled campus-town environment could also be created, being careful not to directly compete with Downtown, but offering student hang-outs, a vending depot, study areas, a book store, campus health services, and other needed outlets and services.

### Auto Commercial Character

In many communities that were shaped by the automobile era over the last century, this character type can account for nearly all existing commercial and industrial areas. It is most commonly associated with automobile-oriented retail strip centers and smaller commercial sites strung along major roadways. Fast food restaurants, gas stations, shopping centers of varying sizes, and big box retailers are the dominant commercial images of an auto-urban character, much like the scene along the Interstate 45 corridor and 11<sup>th</sup> Street. Higher-density residential uses such as attached and multiple-family housing, manufactured home communities, recreational vehicle parks, and site-built homes on small lots also have this character due to their density, limited open space, relative amount of impervious surface devoted to buildings and parking lots, and increased building enclosure.

The primary difference in CBD and auto commercial characters is the role of the automobile in its site design. Rather than buildings oriented to the street, as in an CBD setting like that found in Downtown Huntsville, auto commercial environments are characterized by buildings surrounded by parking lots with limited allowance for landscape surfaces.

Although the development intensity of auto commercial areas is usually less than that found within an urban setting, this is commonly due to parcel size, lower land values and design preference as opposed to development regulations. Auto commercial



Multi-Family



Auto Commercial



uses require a significant amount of space for high levels of automobile-related activity, particularly large surface parking lots and service and loading areas, with multiple points of site ingress/egress. As a result, buildings are constructed at the back of the site nearest neighboring uses and away from their roadway frontage. This outcome is even more predictable in communities with typical commercial zoning in which a minimum versus maximum front yard setback is established. Auto commercial uses also have a greater reliance on site access, thereby adding to the number of driveways along the public street. The result is expansive parking areas that dominate the front setback and, thus, the character of the development and the overall visual scene.

The primary focus on accommodating the automobile, as is typical of much contemporary development, is a primary determinant in the character of an auto commercial environment. Auto commercial uses, with very few exceptions, consume more land for on-site circulation, parking and other vehicular use areas than is covered by buildings, which commonly exceeds a two-to-one ratio. This type of development design demands large sites and proximity to a high-volume arterial roadway, which diminishes the importance of architecture and results in reduced open space and very often the elimination of natural site features.

### Suburban Character



Suburban Character

This community character type is very different from the CBD and auto commercial types. The distinguishing factors of a suburban character are increased open space – both on individual sites and cumulatively throughout a residential subdivision or other developed area – and the preservation or installation of vegetation within and between developments, which helps to create a more even balance between building mass and green mass. Rather than creating a sense of enclosure by buildings, as in an urban environment, trees and vegetation form a very different sense of enclosure. Therefore, open space and vegetative cover are essential elements in creating a suburban environment.

The physical distinction between a suburban and commercial character is the level of use intensiveness or magnitude of activity affecting adjacent uses. Suburban environments are sought as relief from more intensive urban settings, thereby leading to the popularity of contemporary neighborhoods characterized by larger lots, privacy fences, and open areas.



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Relative to other communities its size, Huntsville actually has only a few areas that might be considered suburban given its historical growth trend and limited amount of fringe, large-scale subdivision activity. Elkins Lake is perhaps the premier example of suburban character within the Huntsville city limits. Suburban areas are normally quite different from traditional neighborhoods due to their curvilinear and less interconnected street patterns; contemporary box-like housing styles that result from volume building; an identical building envelope on each lot formed by consistent front, side and rear yard setbacks; and a relative lack of vegetation depending on the original site conditions and degree of preservation effort during development. Enhancing the suburban character of such areas may require varying lot sizes, housing styles and setbacks within each neighborhood; integrating more open space throughout the development; and requiring the use of native vegetation along streets and on each lot to increase the vegetative cover.

All too often, the open space that contributes to the suburban character of a neighborhood is on abutting land that is not yet developed, as are the open vistas that are still intact. As in the case of many neighborhoods in and around Huntsville, particularly those that are on the edge of town or currently abut vacant land, the open feeling that contributes to the rural, small-town character are temporary rather than permanent. The natural open space and views of the landscape are borrowed from the adjoining land. Consequently, as additional development eventually occurs adjacent to these existing neighborhoods, the character will also change, leading to disappointed and dissatisfied homeowners who feel they have lost some value and enjoyment in their own property. When there are no or minimal land development regulations to ensure compatible adjacent uses, the magnitude of character change may vary greatly depending upon the use type developed next door.

This is an important consideration in the design of new subdivisions – and for the protection and sustainability of neighborhoods and residential property values – in terms of whether such developments rely on adjacent land or incorporate permanent open space to sustain their original character. One means of achieving this character so desired by suburban and rural residents is clustered development, which maintains an equal or higher overall development density while preserving permanent open space.

### Estate Character

This special type of suburban character is not common in Huntsville although examples are found around its periphery. An estate character requires low-density development on larger properties (typically one acre or larger), thereby producing



Estate Character

a visual openness. Through these larger lot sizes, open space and vegetation are intended to be the more dominate views, while the buildings are to be apparent, yet secondary to the landscape. Depending upon the size of the home and its percent of coverage and location on the lot, the estate character may resemble a larger version of the typical suburban character. To achieve an estate character, the design of such subdivisions must intentionally seek to imitate more rural areas through the use of rural street sections without sidewalks, vast open space throughout the development, the use of rural fence types and/or hedgerows to divide properties, the preservation or planting of native vegetation along property boundaries, and generous building setbacks on all sides.

### Rural Character

This character class includes three types: countryside, agricultural and natural. Much of the area surrounding Huntsville is typical of a rural character given the prevailing agricultural and forested landscape, with scattered homesteads and other development. Similar to the transition from urban to suburban character, the visible distinction of rural character is the importance of the natural landscape, rather than buildings, as the dominant visual feature. Agricultural activities and undisturbed natural areas are the dominant land use rather than conventional suburban and estate residential developments.

### Countryside Character



Countryside Character

This type of rural character includes sparse residential acreages, which are often in ex-urban areas beyond the city limits where the first signs of suburbanization are present. Examples of a countryside character may be seen in some outlying areas around Huntsville, where dwellings are on larger acreages. The common fate of such areas is eventual conversion to a suburban estate (more dense) character as additional acreages are developed in near proximity. Very low intensities (minimum five-acre lot size) are needed to preserve a countryside character, which can be achieved by vegetative screening and locating homes where they are less visible. This character type may be sustained through stringent limits on minimum lot sizes or permanent protection of prime agricultural land and open space.

### Agricultural Character

The character of this rural area type is defined by agricultural use, where homes are clearly accessory and secondary. Agriculture may also be a dominant land use in countryside areas, which accommodates a rural residential lifestyle while allowing

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agricultural use to continue. But in the more rural areas agricultural operations are intended as nearly the sole use. The landscape is accented by farmsteads, barns, fences lining farm fields and livestock areas, and a virtually unbroken horizon, all of which contribute to its rural character.

It is also important to note the large amount of timber land in and around Huntsville as part of the agricultural character. While many of the surrounding timber lands are a part of the Sam Houston National Forest, there is a significant private interest in timber both through production and processing in and around Huntsville.

### Natural Character

Natural areas are constrained for development due to features such as streams and floodplains, high water table, depth of bedrock, severe slopes, and densely vegetated areas. Certain lands around Huntsville are flood-prone and/or located within the Sam Houston National Forest.



Natural Character